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CENTRE ON MIGRATION, CITIZENSHIP AND DEVELOPMENT

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Transnational dynamics in a migrant researching migrants:

self-reflexivity and boundary-drawing in fieldwork

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Introduction

Ernie and I met up at St. Stephan, a Catholic church, located in the old town of Schönberg one late Sunday morning. After the mass had ended, we were heading to Ernie's apartment for an interview when he asked me about the colonial history of Japan. It was neither the first nor the last time that one of my research participants would confront me with a question along these lines. How can you react to this statement? It was a tense moment for two reasons. On the one hand, it is a test to 'our' colonial history given by the research participant to the researcher. It is a hopelessly tainted subject, particularly in Asia, because the Japanese government has never officially admitted the war-related responsibilities. On the other hand, it is also a boundary that the research participant draws between 'us-Filipinos' and 'them-Japanese'. In answering the question, you could either completely spoil the meeting or just to the contrary, you could even build some sense of trust if you 'pass' the test.

Each one of us, not just research participants but also researchers, occupies multiple positionings in our every day. Intersectionality scholars are debating the ways in which social divisions, often articulated as a 'difference,' can be best captured (Anthias 2002, Anthias & Yuval-Davis 1983, Collins 1986, Crenshaw 2005, Knapp 2005, Lutz & Davis 2009, Yuval-Davis 2006). What role does the positionality of the researcher play in collecting data? How may the researcher's positionality influence the kind of data obtained and consequently the knowledge produced? Being a migrant myself, how does my positionality complicate this question? What about my gender, social class and nationality? By discussing these questions, I wish to link the issue of migrant transnationalism with epistemological debates about studying migrants. In doing so, I explore some of the methodological and epistemological concerns that I have encountered while researching Filipina and Filipino migrant domestic workers between 2001 and 2003 in a German city, which I call Schönberg. More specifically, I first reflect upon methodical and methodological challenges of studying migrants who work in the 'private' sphere, households, and who have more often than not irregular migration status. I shall then detail the constant process of boundary-drawing between the research participants and the researcher. While there is undeniably a clear power asymmetry between the two parties involved, I argue that social positionings may at times work to reverse the researcher vis-à-vis researched power relationship. Boundaries between 'us' and 'them' are not static and rather are defined in a situational manner.

Visible migrant transnationalism, invisible researcher's role

Nina Glick-Schiller and her collaborators' work on "transmigration" and "transmigants" (1992) marked a conceptual milestone in migration studies. Contrary to the conventional assumption in scholarship and policy discourses about migration as a liner movement of people and migrants as 'uprooted' from their country of origin, a large volume of research that appeared after the work of Glick-Schiller et al. has documented and theorized the ties and linkages that migrants continue to maintain with their families and friends across multiple nation-states over time (cf. Cyrus 2008, Faist 2000, Levitt & Glick Schiller 2004, Pessar & Mahler 2001, Smith & Guarnizo 1999, Portes et al. 1999).

Among the protagonists of transnational migration, there are efforts to refine the concept (cf. Portes et al. 1999, Vertovec 2009). In addition, some scholars point out diverse biases in debating migrant transnationalism, one of them is a temporary nature of migratory movements, which also concerns my research population. It includes a large volume of current labor migration worldwide. For example, Mirjana Morokvasic (2003, 2004) maintains that there is a "settler society" bias in empirical studies in North America and speaks of "transnational mobility" in the process of the EU enlargement. Immigration and settlement have become less relevant to the majority of Europeans, who have the right to move back and forth between their home country and the country of residence. Robyn Rodriguez (2002) comments that transnational lives of migrants living in the US are far from universal. Although much of the transnational scholarship theorizes based on the North American immigrant experience, the dominant mode of labor migration in Asia-Pacific is temporary and contractual, which has little in common with permanent immigrants with a set of privileges that come with their status.

While these scholarly efforts rendered the spatial dimension of migrant transnational lives visible, but have surprisingly left the role of the researcher largely untouched. As often in the case of other kinds of social research (Plummer 2001), the researcher's positionality remains 'unmarked'. Consequently, the transnational research process that influences a type and quality of data is seldom discussed in a systematic manner. Instead, we typically simply find a brief section on methods in articles or a part of the introductory chapter describes research processes in the literature base.[1] However, evaluating research processes including the re-

[1] Hammersley and Atkinson (2003) discuss a number of aspects concerning field relations drawing on existing

searcher's role deserves more attention. This is especially true in the social sciences where the socially constructed nature of a 'reality' has been hotly debated in the recent past (cf. Fonow & Cook 1991, Harding 1991). Indeed, this debate is closely linked to the “writing culture” debate in anthropology (Clifford & Marcus 1986) in which conventional scientific authority of anthropology is challenged and academic textual representations are fundamentally produced in asymmetrical power relations between the researcher and the researched. To think about “whose knowledge; what sort of knowledge; what constitutes the social?” as Henrietta Moore, a feminist anthropologist (1996:1), puts it, requires us to be self-reflexive. Douglas Macbeth (2001) theorizes reflexivity at two levels, “positional” and “textual” reflexivity. The former, which this paper addresses, “takes up the analysts’ (uncertain) position and positioning in the world of he or she studies and is often expressed with a vigilance for unseen, privileged, or worse, exploitative relationships between the analyst and the world” (Macbeth 2001: 38). Positional reflexivity is closely intertwined with the researcher’s own biographies, and it is about reflecting upon where one is located in the world one studies. It questions binaries, such as insider vs. outsider, powerful vs. powerless, which are often taken for granted as given and fixed (Macbeth 2001). In what follows, I begin with mapping out my fieldwork strategies in an attempt to get access to the Filipina and Filipino domestics in Schönberg.

Accessing the 'field'

Apart from the obvious language barrier, my ‘outsider’ position made my entry to the field difficult. However, as we shall see later in this paper, this same ‘outsider position’ at times turned out to be asset. I arrived in Germany in the summer of 2001, at the time as a Ph.D. student from Japan, with lots of excitement about immediately 'jumping' into the ‘field’. I had an acquaintance working as a counselor in a Schönberger NGO for Asian migrant women, who agreed to introduce me a couple of Filipina domestic workers with whom she had helped in the past. At this point in my research, she was basically the only gatekeeper as most of the migrants domestic and care workers in Germany, including those from the Philippines, were irregular migrants. Irregular migration status was one of the factors that had made my entry extremely difficult at the beginning given that most of these migrants would tend to avoid unnecessary contacts. Even with a passage of time, illegality would continue to remain a deli-

literature.

cate aspect throughout my fieldwork and the overall research process (cf. Cornelius 1982 in the US context, Vogel 1999 for Germany).

After contacting my acquaintance after arrival, she proceeded to inform me over the phone that it would be an even more difficult task to introduce me to someone as most of the women she knew had become scared by recent events. More precisely, a couple of weeks prior to my arrival there had been a police raid affecting hundreds of households in my field-work location. During the raid, many migrant caregivers were found working without a permit and were subsequently deported She told me that I would have to be patient until the situation calmed down since at the time none of the Filipinas was willing to meet with me. Making matters worse, during the same time period a well-circulated German newspaper featured a series of articles on "illegal migrants". Suddenly, the issues of migrant care and domestic work and irregular migration caught public attention, ironically just when I wanted to start fieldwork. I followed her advice. These incidents taught me to observe the field from a distance. It also made me realize the delicacy of the field I was tapping into and think over my research design.

With that being said, at the same time I could not, however, let the time just pass forever. So in the meantime, I began by gathering interviews from other actors, i.e. a public accident insurance company and employers. The interviews with the employers especially revealed interesting insights into migrant domestic and care work. The first interview materialized unexpectedly through an informal conversation with a former classmate from a German language course. She was a young Scandinavian woman who had come to Germany to join her German husband, who worked for a big multinational company. Through talking to her I figured out that she employed a Filipina cleaner and babysitter. Though I (thought I) knew her well and we often spent time together outside the language course over the course of the 10 months (2 years prior to my fieldwork), she had never mentioned to me employing a domestic worker. After the interview, she offered me to ask 'her' Filipina babysitter if she was willing to meet with me. Nevertheless, at the time I was still reluctant to meet with a Filipina domestic as I continued to have the words of my acquaintance in my mind. Additionally, I did not want to create a situation in which the domestic worker would feel pressured to give me an interview because she could not refuse her employer's request (see also Lan 2006). So instead, my friend referred me to her friend, also an expatriate wife from the USA hiring a Filipina cleaner. Like this friend of mine from the German language course, the American woman employer also offered to help me, saying that 'her' domestic worker is coming by shortly, so she can ask. This time I decided to try my luck, after all it has been four months since the police raid.

Boundary drawing

Pei-chia Lan (2006) uses the concept of “boundary making” in her book Global Cinderellas. By using this concept, she links up a “macro analysis of structural forces with a micro investigation of interpersonal dynamics” between migrant domestics and their Taiwanese employers (p. 11). Her analysis reveals relational positioning to understand the subjectivities of women divided along social divisions, i.e. Filipina and Indonesian migrant domestics on the one hand, and their Taiwanese employers on the other, in dynamic processes of identity formation. Lan alludes to this “boundary” concept in the book introduction where she offers fascinating reflections on her role as a US-trained returning Taiwanese researcher of a middle class background. In what follows, I extend her concept of "boundary" as an epistemological lens to explore how each of my research participants constantly drew and re-drew boundaries between themselves and other actors, including me, by flexibly defining not only difference but also sameness along the intersecting multiple social divisions in our interaction.

In the meantime, my acquaintance from the counseling center arranged a meeting for me with a Filipina domestic in the city center of Schönberg. I was told that this Filipina turned to the counseling center when she had a serious problem with her former employer. Shortly after we had met, my acquaintance suddenly announced that she had to leave in a minute and then disappeared in the crowds. We two were left alone and I was unprepared for this. The Filipina suggested going to a cafe nearby because she also had little time as she had to go to work. I followed her and once in the café we sat down face-to-face at a table. She spoke so quietly that I could barely hear her in the cafe because it was extremely noisy given that it was full and the music was turned on. She told me not to tape-record the interview and not to take notes. Before I even could think of anything to say, she just began to talk: she was very busy, had to work long hours and jobs were hard but now things were going well for her. Her previous employer maltreated her, for example they had confiscated her passport. Without waiting for my reply, she too asked me why I, Japanese, am doing this research about Filipina domestic workers. After some ten minutes, she abruptly stopped talking and said she had to go because she could make her employer wait. The only thing I could do was to thank her for taking her time and nothing more.

The first ‘interview’ with a migrant domestic worker proved to be a tough lesson. I was so naive to blindly believe that the role of the researcher is to ask questions, the role of the interviewee is to collaborate with the researcher and to answer the questions posed. However, what I experienced bore little resemblance to my expectations. The interviewee decided

where the interview takes place, how the interview is done, what topics are to be discussed, by which means the talk is kept a record (or not), how long the person talks, etc. My presumptions were turned upside down. It became more than evident that, apart from a need for different research methods, I have to approach to my research subject with a high degree of reflexivity about the migrants I study as well as about myself, the reflexivity about my positionalities.

Moreover, my first encounters with the field suggested that diverse actors in my research live in different social worlds, divided by the class difference in a global scale. It is a First and Third World difference, i.e. wealthy German, American and Danish citizens being a serviced class vs. poor Filipino citizens being a servicing class. I, as a Japanese citizen, structurally belong to the former and lived somewhere close to the world of employers although I myself did not hire a migrant domestic. Just how easy it was for me to solicit employers, one of them even being my former classmate. In contrast, it required a long waiting period in order to get any kind of contact to a migrant domestic worker.[2] But these different social worlds exist interdependently and they are connected with one another like “circuits” as Saskia Sassen (2004) calls them.

Boundary re-drawing

But do the obvious differences embedded in larger global structures of social inequality determine ‘researcher-researched’ power relationships in social research? How fixed are these boundaries anyway? In other words, once boundaries are drawn, do they remain? If there are multiple social divisions present, that is often the case, which social divisions get prioritized at a particular moment in time and which boundaries are drawn — and may be withdrawn—?

There is no doubt that I occupied a dominating edge in the relationship, owing to my First World, Japanese citizenship as well as my skilled, mobile migrant status. Nonetheless, my dominant positionalities were challenged on a number of occasions. Most of my research participants were not just domestic workers, but were 'established' in their occupation in the sense that they see themselves more as domestic "service providers" than "servants"

[2] There was no obvious public meeting spot as other studies document (Constable 1997, Parreñas 2001), which is presumably due to their irregular migration status and strict police control in public spaces.

(Shinozaki 2005). It can be attributed to the work arrangement in Schönberg and the level of their income. The vast majority of Filipina and Filipino domestic workers did not live with their employers and they commonly had three to five different households they would clean a day. They opted for not taking care of the elderly or handicapped people as this kind of job often requires a round-clock care, often in a live-in arrangement. Thus, most of them have cultivated a large clientele so that they were not dependent on one employer. This way they diversified their income sources. This work arrangement has contributed to enhancing the degree of autonomy as workers, compared to the situation of domestic workers reported in other studies. They also earned a relatively high level of income, above 2,500 Euros a month, which was much higher than my stipend.[3] In fact, some well-off domestic workers who saw me as a young, poor student with no side job even offered me a financial help.

Those who began as a live-in nanny or domestic moved out and had multiple employers, except for two domestics: one Filipina who lived in with her employer who was diplomat, but nonetheless had a couple of additional 'part-time' cleaning jobs. The Filipino male domestic worker cited at the beginning of the paper, Ernie Portillo, lived in with his employer family. During the interview, I noticed that Ernie tried to defend his masculinity in different ways. He repeatedly emphasized his mathematical skills that he still utilizes at work by tutoring the children mathematics, to which the employer couple also attaches importance. He demonstratively began to solve Rubik's Cube and took out his math books out of his bookshelf to show them to me. In addition, he went on to explain to me in great details how he 'taught' his hysteric, moody female employer, who used to treat him in a disgraceful manner, that he is not a "slave" but a "degree-holder" so that he would deserve respect (Shinozaki 2005). I think his narration and performance is best understood as one that emerged out of his downwardly mobile, feminized domestic and care job on a live-in basis. Just as Filipino soldiers occupy a feminized, lower echelon in the US navy (Espiritu 2003), Ernie's double de-masculinized positioning (i.e. live-in / domestic work) exhorted him to show resistance of the male subject not just towards his upper-middle class, white female employer, but also to me while recounting his experience. Also his pride in having quantitative skills can be read as an attempt not to be de-skilled on the one hand. On the other hand, it could be read as performing objective masculinity vis-à-vis emotional femininity i.e. his female employer.

[3] The going rates for Filipina and Filipino domestic workers were 7.5 Euros and above and evidence suggests that these rates were much higher than other nationalities or ethnic groups in the same city.

Besides, my childless single status puzzled many Filipinas and Filipinos. Since heterosexual marriage and procreation are important conditions to become ideal citizens for Filipinas and Filipinos (Lauser 2005, Parreñas 2003), they pondered why I, in my late 20s, was not married to my boyfriend and may have felt that I will still have to 'grow' into female adulthood. Whenever children and problems with their husbands and in-laws were the topic of our conversation, they recounted and explained these matters in details (cf. Shinozaki 2003). On the one hand, the mother vs. non-mother divide turned out to be an invaluable source to gain their perspectives on transnational marital relationships and parenthood. On the other hand, this divide gave Filipina migrant mothers a moral 'uplift'.

More interestingly still, the boundaries between my research participants and me were at times rendered almost invisible, in particular under the categories visible 'AusländerInnen' and 'Asians'. When I hang out with Filipinas and Filipinos in Schönberg, with my appearance I could often 'pass' as a Chinese-Filipina. However, my disguised identity was revealed to Filipinas and Filipinos as soon as I began to speak some Filipino words in a funny accent. They were in fact proud of having a "Japanese friend" in Germany. This narrative goes counter a negative image about Japan, the colonial power in the past, and a major destination for young Filipina 'performing artists' in the present, who are stigmatized as de facto prostitutes. Also having a "Japanese friend" in Germany was a synonym for 'progressive' and 'international' for some of my research participants. Although I was personally troubled with this association, what was interesting for me was that my research participants drew a boundary between 'us: Asians' and 'them: Germans and Europeans'. It pertains to growing homesickness felt in dietary habits and constraints living in the 'West,' including having to eat bread and cheese all too often. They wanted me confirm a statement like, "We Asians eat rice three times a day, right? So we cook every day even if we are really tired." In addition, the importance placed on the family was another example to delineate the boundary between 'us: Asians' and individualistic 'them: Germans and Europeans'. One interview partner told me, "My German employers just don't understand how I and my wife could leave our kids behind in the Philippines in order to make a living. But you are also Asian, so you know how important the family is and you sacrifice yourself for your family." The way they essentialized 'Asian-ness' and 'European-ness' downplayed the differences predicated on social class and global inequalities.

Paradoxically, another boundary that my research participants drew was based on my very outsider-position, i.e. that I am not a Filipina. While Filipina and Filipino migrants were able to draw on moral and financial support provided in ethnic, hometown, familial, and religious

communities, these support networks at the same time functioned as social control. Thus, some of the very intimate spheres of life, which could be a source of gossiping, were often not disclosed in the diverse Filipino communities (cf. Lauser 2005, Niesner et al. 1997, Parreñas 2001). In contrast, in my over 18 month-long fieldwork, many Filipino women and men confided me their highly personal accounts that many of their compatriots would not know. These range from extramarital affairs to an abortion that a left-behind young daughter went through. The migrants I interviewed probably felt safe to share these stories with me because I was perceived as a trustworthy outsider. No matter how deeply I immersed myself in the communities ('going native'), after all I was a Ph.D. student from Japan and not 'part of' them. They knew that I had no interest to harm or threaten their life or work with the knowledge I gained and will not gossip around. My 'outsider' position unexpectedly became an advantage in that it helped me gather a special kind of life stories.

Conclusions

My fieldwork took shape in dynamic processes of continuous boundary-drawing. At the outset of my fieldwork, my German thesis advisor half-jokingly commented that the fact that I myself am an Asian migrant and not a German may play a role in getting data from Filipina migrant domestics. With a passage of time, I came to understand what she meant by this (Lutz 1991). Moreover, apart from my Asian appearance and migrant status, other social divisions such as blue color worker vs. student status, First-World-vis-à-vis-Third-World citizenship, motherhood, (post-)coloniality played a decisive role in defining the power relations. These relations are context specific and, as the paper illustrated, the well-known power hierarchy between the researcher and the researched may be challenged. Boundaries are drawn and re-drawn flexibly through interactions between the researcher and the research participants. When the conventional researcher-researched boundaries get blurred and new creative boundaries are drawn where intimate, personal accounts are told to the researcher, perhaps we could speak of a temporary transnational coalition in the sense that a relationship between the researcher and the research participant transgresses national belonging.

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